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C O N F I D E N T I A L PARTO 00017

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/02/2013

TAGS: [PREL PHUM TS](#)

SUBJECT: (U) SECRETARY POWELL'S DECEMBER 2, 2003 MEETING
WITH TUNISIAN PRESIDENT BEN ALI

1.(U) CLASSIFIED BY: MARCIA K. WONG, DEPUTY EXECUTIVE
SECRETARY, S/ES, DEPARTMENT OF STATE. REASON 1.4. (D)

2.(U) 12/02/03; 16:00 HOURS; TUNIS, TUNISIA.

3.(U) PARTICIPANTS:

U.S.
THE SECRETARY
TERENCE MCCULLEY, CHARGE D'AFFAIRES (NOTETAKER)
A/S WILLIAM BURNS, NEA
A/S RICHARD BOUCHER, PA
ATUL KESHAP, NSC
GEMAL HELAL, INTERPRETER

TUNISIA
PRESIDENT ZINE EL ABIDINE BEN ALI
ABDELAZIZ BEN DHIA, MINISTER OF STATE/SPECIAL ADVISOR TO
THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC
HABIB BEN YAHIA, FOREIGN MINISTER

14. (C) SUMMARY: IN A LIVELY ONE HOUR AND 45 MINUTE MEETING
ON DECEMBER 2, THE SECRETARY AND TUNISIAN PRESIDENT BEN ALI
REVIEWED IRAQ, THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, THE GLOBAL
WAR ON TERROR, TUNISIA'S MIXED RECORD ON HUMAN RIGHTS, AND
ITS SUBSTANTIAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS SINCE
INDEPENDENCE. BEN ALI TERMED THE U.S.-TUNISIA FRIENDSHIP A
"STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP." HE URGED THE UNITED STATES TO
STAY THE COURSE IN IRAQ (WHILE CRITICIZING THE
"UNREALISTIC" TIMETABLE FOR TURNING OVER POWER TO IRAQIS
AND THE UNSETTLED SECURITY SITUATION), AND HE EXPRESSED
PESSIMISM THAT ANY PALESTINIAN LEADER BUT ARAFAT COULD
DELIVER THE PEACE AND SECURITY THAT ISRAEL REQUIRED. BEN
ALI ADDED THAT IF THE U.S. COULD WORK UNILATERALLY WITH
ISRAEL TO CRAFT A SOLUTION ACCEPTABLE TO THE PALESTINIANS,
"I WILL DELIVER ARAFAT." ON TUNISIA'S INTERNAL POLITICAL
SITUATION, THE SECRETARY URGED BEN ALI TO MOVE FORWARD WITH
POLITICAL OPENING AND MEDIA FREEDOM, IN ORDER TO ENSURE
THAT POLITICAL REFORM MATCHED TUNISIA'S REMARKABLE RECORD
OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS. BEN ALI REPLIED WITH A
VIGOROUS DEFENSE OF TUNISIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD, AND
CLAIMED THAT "NOT A SINGLE JOURNALIST" WAS IN PRISON FOR
HIS POLITICAL VIEWS. NOTING THAT BEN ALI WOULD MEET WITH
PRESIDENT BUSH IN WASHINGTON IN FEBRUARY 2004, THE
SECRETARY REITERATED THAT TUNISIA NEEDED TO DEMONSTRATE
PROGRESS ON HUMAN RIGHTS, IN ORDER TO COUNTER THE IMAGE
THAT WAS WIDELY PORTRAYED IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA. END
SUMMARY.

IRAQ - SECURITY AND STAYING THE COURSE

15. (C) THE SECRETARY TOLD PRESIDENT BEN ALI THAT IRAQ
REMAINED A CRUCIAL ISSUE FOR THE UNITED STATES, AND THAT
PRESIDENT BUSH WAS DETERMINED TO STAY THE COURSE UNTIL THE
IRAQI PEOPLE COULD DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTIONS. HE REVIEWED PROGRESS ON IRAQ, INCLUDING
CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR RECONSTRUCTION, SUPPORT FROM THE
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, AND PROGRESS ON INFRASTRUCTURE AND

RE-ESTABLISHING THE IRAQI POLICE AND BORDER SECURITY FORCES. SECURITY REMAINED A PROBLEM, BUT COALITION FORCES WOULD ULTIMATELY PREVAIL. NOTING THE POSITIVE OUTCOME OF THE OCTOBER MADRID DONORS CONFERENCE, THE SECRETARY PRAISED THE PARTICIPATION OF TUNISIA.

¶6. (C) BEN ALI TERMED THE CURRENT SITUATION IN IRAQ A "TRUE TRAGEDY." WHILE IT WAS INDISPUTABLE THAT THE UNITED STATES HAD SAVED THE IRAQI PEOPLE FROM THE DEPREDATIONS OF A DICTATOR, HE SAID THAT TUNISIA WAS DEEPLY CONCERNED OVER THE DETERIORATING SECURITY SITUATION. HE TOOK NOTE OF THE POSITIVE STEPS SINCE THE END OF THE WAR, BUT STRESSED THAT UNLESS THE UNITED STATES COULD DEMONSTRATE THAT ITS PRESENCE HAD PRODUCED POSITIVE AND SUSTAINED CHANGES IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE AVERAGE IRAQI, THE U.S. WOULD CONTINUE TO BE SEEN AS AN OCCUPIER AND NOT A LIBERATOR.

¶7. (C) BEN ALI ALSO TOLD THE SECRETARY THAT HE HAD SERIOUS DOUBTS ABOUT THE TIMETABLE ESTABLISHED FOR THE RESTORATION OF IRAQI SOVEREIGNTY, NOTING THAT THE JUNE DEADLINE SEEMED TOO OPTIMISTIC. DESPITE THIS, BEN ALI UNDERLINED THAT U.S. FORCES MUST REMAIN IN IRAQ FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD, "OR THERE WILL BE CIVIL WAR." THE SECRETARY AGREED THAT THE JUNE TIMETABLE WAS OPTIMISTIC, BUT HE STRESSED THE NEED TO GIVE THE IRAQI GOVERNING COUNCIL A REAL DEADLINE. WHETHER THE IGC MET THIS DEADLINE OR NOT, HOWEVER, THE SECRETARY REITERATED THAT THE U.S. WAS DETERMINED TO STAY THE COURSE.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE - ARAFAT ABOVE "ALL THOSE ABUS"

¶8. (C) THE SECRETARY TOLD BEN ALI THAT THE UNITED STATES REMAINED COMMITTED TO IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ROADMAP, BUT THE U.S. NEEDED PALESTINIAN PRIME MINISTER ABU ALA'A TO TAKE FIRM STEPS IN THE AREA OF SECURITY. IF THE PALESTINIANS COULD TAKE THESE STEPS, HE ADDED, IT WOULD BE EASIER FOR THE U.S. TO CONVINCE THE ISRAELIS TO FULFILL THEIR PART OF THE ROADMAP. HE ASKED BEN ALI TO CARRY THIS MESSAGE TO TUNISIA'S PARTNERS IN THE REGION, AND ESPECIALLY TO THE PALESTINIANS.

¶9. (C) BEN ALI EXPRESSED DEEP PESSIMISM ABOUT ABU ALA'A'S ABILITY TO DELIVER ON PEACE AND SECURITY. HE SAID THAT NEITHER ABU MAZEN, ABU ALA'A, "OR ANY OTHER AMONG ALL THOSE ABUS" COULD DO ANY BETTER. THE ONLY PALESTINIAN FIGURE CAPABLE OF BRINGING THE PALESTINIANS TO THE PEACE TABLE WAS ARAFAT. "HE CANNOT BE GOTTEN AROUND," BEN ALI UNDERLINED, ADDING THAT HIS POSITION AS THE HISTORIC LEADER OF THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE AND THE SYMBOL OF THE NATION MADE HIM AN INDISPENSABLE PARTNER IN THE PEACE PROCESS. CONTINUING, HOWEVER, BEN ALI CRITICIZED BOTH ARAFAT AND SHARON, NOTING THAT BOTH MUST PUT ASIDE THEIR PERSONAL QUARREL IN ORDER TO SIT DOWN AT THE TABLE AND WORK OUT A PEACEFUL SETTLEMENT. TUNISIA WOULD CONTINUE ITS LONG TRADITION OF SUPPORT FOR THE PEACE PROCESS, BUT HE REPEATED THAT SIDELINING ARAFAT "WOULD BE A MISTAKE." HE THEN SUGGESTED THAT THE U.S. WORK UNILATERALLY WITH ISRAEL TO COME UP WITH AN "ACCEPTABLE SOLUTION" TO THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT. IF THE SOLUTION MET THE LEGITIMATE NEEDS OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE, BEN ALI UNDERTOOK TO DELIVER ARAFAT. "I KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH ARAFAT AND I CAN PERSUADE HIM."

¶10. (C) IN REPLY, THE SECRETARY NOTED ARAFAT'S HISTORIC ROLE IN THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE, BUT SAID THAT HE WAS A FAILED LEADER WHO HAD NOT BEEN WILLING TO USE HIS INFLUENCE AND POSITION TO MOVE THE PEACE PROCESS FORWARD. THE SECRETARY NOTED HIS EFFORTS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF THE ADMINISTRATION TO SPUR ARAFAT TO TAKE CONCRETE STEPS TO HALT PALESTINIAN TERRORIST ATTACKS, BUT THE PA PRESIDENT HAD FAILED IN ALL RESPECTS. PRESIDENT BUSH, THE SECRETARY STRESSED, HAD COME TO THE DECISION THAT THE U.S. COULD NOT CONTINUE TO INVEST IN ARAFAT. WHILE HE AGREED THAT ABU MAZEN'S TENURE AS PA PRIME MINISTER HAD NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL, THE U.S. WOULD WATCH CAREFULLY TO SEE IF ABU ALA'A COULD TAKE THE STEPS NEEDED TO MOVE FORWARD ON THE ROADMAP.

TERRORISM - TUNISIA'S "LONG BATTLE"

¶11. (C) TURNING TO THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR, BEN ALI REMINDED THE SECRETARY OF TUNISIA'S LONG CAMPAIGN AGAINST RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS. HE SAID TUNISIA SUPPORTED AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON TERRORISM, AND HAD ALSO CALLED FOR A FORUM TO EXAMINE THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE PHENOMENON. HE LAUDED TUNISIA'S COOPERATION WITH THE EU AND THE US ON TERRORISM ISSUES, BUT HE CRITICIZED THE EUROPEANS FOR FAILING TO HEED TUNISIAN WARNINGS ABOUT SPECIFIC INDIVIDUALS. BEN ALI ASSERTED THAT TUNISIA HAD PROVIDED INFORMATION "YEARS AGO" TO BELGIUM ABOUT THE INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN THE ASSASSINATION OF AFGHAN LEADER AHMED SHAH MASSOUD, BUT THE BELGIANS HAD FAILED TO ACT. ATTACKING THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CAUSES OF TERRORISM, HE ADDED, WAS ESSENTIAL, AND WHILE HIS COUNTRY HAD MADE GREAT PROGRESS IN THIS AREA, BEN ALI NOTED HIS CONCERNS ABOUT A RESURGENCE OF CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN TUNISIA.

¶12. (C) LOOKING AT THE SUB-REGION, BEN ALI SAID THAT TUNISIA REMAINED IN A BETTER POSITION THAN ITS NEIGHBORS IN THE BATTLE AGAINST TERRORISTS. ALGERIA, HE NOTED, WAS "AT THE BEGINNING OF THE END" IN ITS WAR, WHILE MOROCCO WAS "AT THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING." THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT TERROR WAS TO ATTACK THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAUSES THAT SPAWNED THE TERRORIST.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL OPENING - "IT IS FICTION"

¶13. (C) THE SECRETARY AGREED ON THE NEED TO DEAL WITH THE ROOT CAUSES OF TERRORISM. HE SAID IT WAS IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE REGION, AND HE NOTED PRESIDENT BUSH'S SUPPORT FOR EXPANDING FREE TRADE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, AND FOR POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC OPENING THROUGH THE MIDDLE EAST PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE. GREATER DEMOCRATIZATION AND AN EXPANSION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN WERE KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS, AND THE SECRETARY PRAISED TUNISIA FOR ITS PROGRESS ON WOMEN'S ISSUES AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS. THE WORLD IS NOW LOOKING, HE ADDED, FOR BEN ALI TO DO MORE TO PROMOTE POLITICAL OPENNESS AND MEDIA FREEDOM, AND HE CITED RECENT MEDIA REPORTS CRITICIZING THE STATE OF POLITICAL FREEDOM IN TUNISIA. TUNISIA NEEDED TO DO MORE TO COUNTER THE IMAGE PORTRAYED IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA, PARTICULARLY AS PRESIDENT BEN ALI PREPARED FOR HIS MEETING WITH PRESIDENT BUSH.

¶14. (C) IN REPLY, BEN ALI LAUNCHED INTO A VIGOROUS DEFENSE OF TUNISIA'S POLITICAL CLIMATE AND HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD. IN "OPENING THE GATES OF FREEDOM," TUNISIA WAS A PIONEER. REVIEWING THE COUNTRY'S RECORD OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS, HE ASSERTED THAT A "COLLECTIVE" OF HUMAN RIGHTS EXISTED, INCLUDING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN, AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION, HEALTH CARE AND HOUSING. THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIZED THE LEGAL OPPOSITION, AND HE HAD INSTRUCTED THAT 20 PERCENT OF THE SEATS IN THE COUNTRY'S PARLIAMENT WERE TO BE RESERVED FOR THE OPPOSITION. MOREOVER, "NOT ONE SINGLE JOURNALIST WHO HAS CRITICIZED THE GOVERNMENT IS IN PRISON." HE CRITICIZED THE EMBASSY'S HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING, AND HE CHALLENGED THE U.S. TO PROVIDE "TANGIBLE EVIDENCE" OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES. DISMISSING AS "FICTION" THE PRESS REPORTS, HE SAID, "I AM A PRACTICAL MAN, I MUST DEAL WITH SPECIFICS." CONCLUDING, HE ADMITTED THAT TUNISIA WAS NOT PERFECT, THAT THE COUNTRY WOULD CONTINUE TO REFORM ITS INSTITUTIONS, AND THAT IF THE U.S. HAD SPECIFICS TO DISCUSS HE WAS READY TO ENGAGE.

¶15. (C) THE SECRETARY REPLIED THAT TUNISIA'S PROGRESS, PARTICULARLY IN THE AREA OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS WAS INDEED IMPRESSIVE, AND THAT THE COUNTRY'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN THE AREAS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM WERE INDISPUTABLE, BUT THAT THE UNITED STATES HAD AN OBLIGATION AS A FRIEND TO TELL THE GOT WHAT WAS NEEDED IF TUNISIA WISHED TO BE ACCEPTED AS A FULLY MODERN STATE. BEN ALI STEPPED BACK FROM HIS POLEMIC, AND THE MEETING CONCLUDED WITH AN OPEN

INVITATION TO THE SECRETARY TO RETURN FOR A LONGER VISIT,
AND A CONFIRMATION FROM THE TUNISIAN LEADER THAT HE WOULD
COME TO WASHINGTON IN FEBRUARY FOR A MEETING WITH THE
PRESIDENT.

POWELL